

**Agriculture Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight,
Nutrition and Forestry**

**Hearing on the Food Stamp Program
June 27, 2001**

Written Testimony of Representative Tony P. Hall

Chairman Goodlatte, Ranking Member Clayton and other members of the Committee, I thank you for holding this hearing on the Food Stamp Program. I applaud this Committee's commitment to investigate and close the gap between food stamp eligibility and participation that so many studies are reporting. Over the past 17 years of fighting hunger in Congress, I have met many families struggling to survive. We know that 31 million Americans are threatened by hunger each year, according to the US Department of Agriculture, and despite what critics claim, the Food Stamp Program is an effective tool in feeding these families. It is a simple solution that works. Food Stamps are not the only solution, but a significant part of the comprehensive strategy to end hunger. However, even solutions like the Food Stamp Program need adjusting as times change. As part of the next Farm Bill, we have an opportunity to update the program so that more hungry Americans are served.

Overview of Participation in the Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Program is the cornerstone of the USDA nutrition assistance programs. It provides electronic benefits or coupons that can be exchanged for food at qualified retail food stores. This translates into supporting millions of families going through rough times until they can stand on their own again. It also supports our food producers, processors and suppliers.

However, participation in the Food Stamp Program has declined 34 percent over the past four years the decrease is four times the decrease in the poverty rate during the same period, leaving more than 2 million people in poverty and without food stamps. In addition, USDA estimates that 6.1 million adults and 3.2 million children lived in households that experienced hunger in 1998. Some of the recent drop in caseloads is a result of the 1996 welfare law that excluded substantial groups from participation in food stamps. Some is due in part to the growing economy and lower unemployment. Most of the drop is due to states' unwillingness or inability to get food stamps to eligible families, especially working families.

The Food Research and Action Center published the "State of the States" report which profiles the status of Food and Nutrition Programs Across the Nation. In my home state of Ohio, it is estimated that only 53-64% of eligible persons are participating in food stamps. According to the USDA, 80% of food stamp benefits go to households with children and senior citizens. The average length of participation is less than two years, and half of all new recipients stay in the program less than 6 months. This program can serve as a true safety net for families that experience short periods of financial difficulty.

It is time for us to ensure that eligible people in need receive the benefits to which they are entitled. One initiative in this Congress would not solve all of our problems, but it is a significant step in the right direction. I am proud to cosponsor, with Eva Clayton and Jim Walsh, the Nutrition Assistance for Working Families and Seniors Act, HR 2142, which would achieve the following:

- Restore Food Stamp Eligibility for Needy Legal Immigrants
- Increase Benefit Allotments for Families with Children
- Raise Minimum Food Stamp Benefit to \$25
- Treat Child Support Income Favorably
- Expand State Option for Transitional Food Stamp Assistance
- Improve Food Stamp Access, and
- Bolster the TEFAP Program

These items, along with those from the Hunger Relief Act that passed last year, are steps in the right direction.

The Elderly and Food Stamps

One population that we need to pay special attention to are senior citizens. Only a small number of the elderly are enrolled in the Food Stamp Program. In FY 1999, only 20% of all households enrolled in Food Stamps contained an elderly member. There are multiple reasons for the lack of participation from this population. There are perceived problems with program administration and the stigma in regards to public assistance. However, the most important problem that needs to be solved is the low minimum benefits.

Currently, one and two person households that are eligible for food stamps are assured a minimum benefit of only \$10 – an amount that has not changed since 1977. In FY 1999, single person elderly households average \$46 a month in Food Stamp benefits. HR 2142 raises the minimum food stamp benefit to \$25 a month. I think it should be a minimum of \$50 per month and ideally around \$75, but there is no question that it needs to be increased. Seniors on a fixed income, due to SSI or Social Security, typically have large medical bills and require expensive prescription drugs. Food is the first item eliminated from a budget, but the most important for the elderly and ill.

One 84-year-old woman, Barbara, from Lima, OH shared her opinion on the Food Stamp Program while waiting for food at a pantry. “I was eligible for \$10 a month in Food Stamps and it wasn’t worth it. It’s a 16-20 mile distance to the department and I don’t have transportation. And I could never keep up with the paperwork.” Barbara lives alone and has never gotten a driver’s license. Barbara lives off of her late husband’s Social Security, but her health has declined and medicine has taken priority over food. The burden of the food stamp application process needs to reap larger benefits than \$10 for Barbara to feel it is worth her time and effort.

Darryl and Martha Wagner, another Ohio couple that I've met, receive about \$1,000 per month in retirement and Social Security. He is 70 years old and she is battling cancer. After applying and being denied three times, they were finally informed that they were entitled to receive \$10 per month in food stamps. They decided it was not worth the cost, time and effort to recertify every three months for a measly 33 cents per day.

Currently there are special rules for the elderly, including medical expense deductions and a 24-month certification period, but the bottom line for many is the minimum allowable benefits. With HR 2142, we have an opportunity to show Barbara, the Wagners and other eligible seniors that the Food Stamp Program is worth the effort and a key element in maintaining their health and quality of life.

Working Families and Food Stamps

With the onset of welfare reform, TANF recipient caseloads have decreased. There is growing research that shows a correlation between the decreased TANF roles and decreased Food Stamp roles. There is a push by welfare staff to divert clients from all assistance programs. As a result these same families are not taking advantage of non-cash programs for which they are still eligible, such as Food Stamps.

The Urban Institute study finds that 33% of former welfare recipients have to skip or cut meals due to lack of food. America's Second Harvest reports that one in five people in a soup kitchen line is a child. Over half of food stamp recipients are children aged 17 and under, according to FRAC. Thirty-four percent of children on the program are preschool age (under age 5). The current Food Stamp Program counts child support as earned income. In HR 2142, 20% of the child support income is disregarded and treats child support favorably. In addition, by indexing the food stamp standard deduction and scaling it to family size, this bill makes important improvements in the adequacy of benefit levels, especially low-income families with children.

Through HR 2142, Food Stamp Outreach Programs are supported and The Emergency Food Assistance Program is increased. The need for emergency food has increased by 15-20% over the past year according to the network of food providers. The demand is too high for the non-profit faith-based organizations to meet on their own. Allowing funds to be used for outreach, we can identify eligible people in their own neighborhoods. In Cleveland, Ohio, the foodbank system has partnered with the Food Stamp Office to outstation eligibility workers in member agencies. Gestures like these will aid in the depletion of the stigma and meet the need of hungry people across the nation.

I am pleased that you have recognized the need for increasing TEFAP, Chairman Goodlatte, and am proud to join you in supporting the Emergency Food Assistance Program Enhancement

Act. I commend this subcommittee for holding hearings on this program and seeking to assist emergency food providers with USDA commodities and resources to store and distribute this necessary food.

Conclusion

I would like to share with you one final story of a family in Columbus, Ohio.

On October 1, 2000 welfare reform time limits hit in Ohio. One family a single mother with four children was in jeopardy of losing her cash assistance. The children were too young for school and mom couldn't find a job that paid enough to afford childcare. She thought she was losing all her benefits when her cash assistance ran out. This helpless mother felt her only option was placing her children up for adoption. She shared this idea with local advocates and they immediately stepped into action. The advocates worked with her to apply for food stamps, childcare assistance, and job training. The mother was able to keep her children and move toward self-sufficiency.

Thanks to food stamps, millions of families are able to support themselves and maintain health and dignity until they can once again become self-sufficient. The Food Stamp Program is the cornerstone to USDA's anti-hunger safety net. Through HR 2142, we are creating opportunities for families to receive the nutritious allowances necessary for a healthy life.

Once again, thank you Chairman Goodlatte, Representative Clayton and other members of this Committee. I applaud your efforts to enhance the Food Stamp Program and to work towards an end to hunger in our country.